

## **Introduction to *Pilgrim in the Land of Alligators***

By William McKeen

A few years back – in better budget times – I hired Jeff Klinkenberg to teach our feature writing course at the University of Florida. Whenever possible, we try to bring in working reporters to teach in the Department of Journalism. Gainesville’s talent pool is shallow and it’s sometimes hard for a measly university paycheck to lure journalists from Jacksonville, Orlando or Tampa Bay. Getting a star columnist from the St. Petersburg Times was a coup.

Though it meant a higher rate than we usually pay (“The Klinkenberg Bonus,” he insisted we call it) and a dull Interstate drive from St. Petersburg, Jeff was willing to make the sacrifice – as long as we also paid for a specified number of nights’ lodging at the Herlong Mansion in Micanopy. (He hopes one day to wake up face-to-face with one of the Herlong’s ghosts.)

The second week of that semester, a young woman showed up at my door, looking for her feature-writing class. She had missed the first week.

“It’s meeting at Paynes Prairie today,” I told her.

“Uh, *yeah*,” she snorted. “No, I mean, like *really* . . . where is it?”

“It’s meeting at Paynes Prairie,” I repeated. “For real.”

The student rolled her eyes and slouched out of my office. *I wonder how long she’ll last?* I thought.

But that’s Klinkenberg. Like all great teachers, he knows that writing can’t be taught – it can only be learned – and that chances are you won’t learn much of anything sitting in a classroom. Jeff insisted that his students see the world up close and personal, in all of its weirdness and splendor.

I’ve always thought that Jeff had the best job in Florida: *Have Radials, Will Travel*. He drives the county roads and blue highways of this wacky state and gets to meet the sort of people you’ll never see on the network news. Lots of journalists have followed this sort of path. Before the Second World War, Ernie Pyle drove around the country, finding common-man stories that were syndicated by the Scripps Howard News Service. In the midst of the bad craziness of the 1960s, CBS News correspondent Charles Kuralt delivered literate and soothing fables of off-the-beaten-path America.

Both of those journalists were poet laureates of the road and I bet they wouldn’t mind scooting over to give Jeff the shotgun seat. Like them, Jeff is a true believer in the idea of wonderment around the next bend. For 30 years, he has turned his eye on all of Florida’s creatures – great and small, sacred and profane, human and otherwise. As the state becomes ever more “pallid and boring” (Jeff’s phrase), he still manages to crawl into the corners to find the rare, precious, beautiful and odd.

There’s a lot of debate in the journalism business about the future of newspapers. Most academic chin-scratchers seem to think it’s bleak and that only aging dilettantes and technological dinosaurs still read newspapers. But I’ve always believed that the future of print journalism is in its past – in great stories, well told. Television, radio and the Internet long ago swiped the real news from newspapers and left us with big, wide-open spaces to do what newspapers do

best: tell stories. Since humans first gathered around a campfire, we wanted stories. When we crawled into daddy's lap at bedtime, we just wanted stories. When we trudge to the end of the driveway at the crack of dawn, it's stories that we want to find when we rip open the newspaper. I've always thought it the height of arrogance that this generation thinks it will preside over the death of something that's been around, in some form or another, since 59 B.C. As long as newspapers print great stories, they will have an audience.

Jeff Klinkenberg is a masterful storyteller. It's a pleasure to open up the paper and be drawn into one of his great tales. It's an even greater pleasure – a weenie roast, even – to have his worked collected in this wonderful volume.